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The Holy Spirit in Twenty-First Century Ministry

MARK FROST

The Sunday-School story in about the discovery of the Book of the Law under the reign of Josiah (2 Chron 34:14-33) puzzled me as a child. I couldn't understand how the Law could have become lost in the first place. In the Church of Christ where I grew up, the Bible was the centerpiece of all we did. We read our Bibles; we brought them to church; we had frequent Bible classes; the preacher quoted dozens of Bible passages in each sermon; our conversations—even our arguments—were peppered with biblical references.

I could not imagine that a structured religious community could exist apart from the written Law of God. Yet in Josiah's day, the people were religious, the temple was standing in Jerusalem, the priesthood was functioning, and collections were being taken up—all in the complete absence of God's written word. Admittedly, the nation's spiritual state was deplorable as a result. But that they could even exist as a religious community without knowing about the Law seemed unbelievable to me.

HOW WE LOST THE SPIRIT

What now seems equally unbelievable is that the church of my youth was almost as unaware of the Holy Spirit as Josiah's generation was of the Book of the Law. How amazing that we could have carried on for so long, confident that we were pleasing to God in every respect, and yet have known so little of the Spirit of God! How could a people simply "misplace" the Holy Spirit? Of course, we were aware of the Holy Spirit's existence, because we read about him in our Bibles. But we read through a set of bifocals that separated history into "that was then" and "this is now."

There was a time, we believed, when the spirit world interacted with the physical world more fully. In that era, which encompassed the life of Jesus and the first generation of the church, the Holy Spirit was active in healing diseases, defeating demons, setting apart workers for special tasks, and empowering God's people to do mighty works. But, we argued, at the end of that era, miracles ceased. And because miracles were no longer available, we expected little to happen through the Holy Spirit's ministry that could not be otherwise explained by our five senses.

How did we arrive at such a mindset? Leonard Allen and Danny Swick point to the triumph of modern thought as the basic cause:

Over the last three centuries, the architects of the modern world gradually constructed a solid and impenetrable canopy that effectively shut out the invisible spiritual realm. Through the long rise of the secular and scientific worldview, a dome was erected over Western culture. Its first effect was to create a great divide between the natural and the supernatural. The world of the mechanized and the managed became the only world that mattered. Christian intellectuals and apologists, to varying degrees, sought to accommodate that worldview. They sought to reformulate faith—and tone down or banish its mysteries—so that it could pass modernity's all-important test: scientific rationality.¹

Alexander Campbell, an early leader in our movement, was one who sought to accommodate biblical teaching to the modern worldview while still affirming the Bible's supernatural origin. Following his lead, we learned instinctively to relegate the supernatural elements of the Bible story to a long-past "then," while still extracting from the text principles for living in the "now." The result was a fellowship that was almost entirely dependent on the Bible as understood by unaided human reason. Direct intervention from the spirit world was neither invited nor expected.

RECOVERY OF THE SPIRIT IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The 21st century presents us with a golden opportunity to recover our understanding and experience of the Spirit's ministry. Currently, the assumptions of modern thought are widely questioned and often rejected as inadequate by believers and unbelievers alike. Leonard and Swick comment that

modernity's impenetrable dome has fallen under its own weight. There is a new openness to the transcendent, invisible and spiritual realm. Christians are now able to embrace more readily the full wealth of historic Christian convictions, some of which—miracles, the Trinity, the reality of the "powers" and of a Divine presence, for example—were readily sacrificed or compromised to accommodate modernity.²

In Churches of Christ, a new openness to the Spirit has been growing for some time. As long ago as 1967, Bill Banowsky was warning of the dangers of "anti-supernaturalism,"³ even as some courageous college professors were reaffirming the reality of the Spirit's indwelling. Later came a renewed interest in the gifts of the Spirit and their role in the body. In recent years, it has become more common to hear people in our fellowship speak openly of the Spirit's activity in their lives. In church after church, groups are studying books like *Experiencing God*⁴ and learning to reclaim the immediacy of God's presence.

Still, it's my impression that as a movement we enter the new century having only begun the journey. We are taking baby steps into what for us is a new realm—the realm of the Spirit's ministry among us and through us. Continuing on that journey will involve gaining new perspectives in several key areas.

THE SPIRIT AND THE WORD

Churches of Christ have always believed that the Holy Spirit inspired the Bible. For much of our history, the majority view among us has been that the Spirit has no further role in mediating the written word to us. We believed that by using our eyes as input devices and our brains as the CPU, we could arrive at the totality of God's will as surely as a computer calculates a square root. However, we are beginning to realize that this view places too much confidence in human reason apart from the enlightenment of the Spirit. It ignores the fact that Paul prayed that God "may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know him better [and] that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened" (Eph. 1:17-18).

As we enter the 21st century, we are more and more aware that the Spirit's ministry is necessary if we are to properly understand the Word. No doubt our absolute conviction that the Bible is God's inspired word will continue. We may, however, approach the Word with greater humility, with the awareness that "no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9).

We will not approach the Bible as technicians seeking to construct a systematic doctrine from its parts. Rather, we will read the Bible more devotionally, admiring its artistry and seeking to engage its Author in dialogue. We will be more open to meanings in the text that may not be obvious to human reason but may emerge from a dynamic relationship with the Spirit.

THE SPIRIT AND THE BODY

Our new appreciation for the Spirit's activity causes us to view the church differently. Once, we saw the church as an organization assembled by human beings according to a divine blueprint. Increasingly, we see it as an organism animated by the Spirit, who provides the DNA for its growth and development. This means that our task involves more than learning and applying principles for church management. Instead, we seek to discover and use the gifts the Spirit has placed in the body.

In my home congregation we teach that every new member is a gift from God disguised as a need. Mari certainly looked like a huge need when she walked in our doors. Recent chemo treatments had left her bald. One leg was wrapped with heavy bandages. She walked with crutches and dressed in T-shirts and sweat shorts. But just a few months later, we discovered what a marvelous gift God had sent us in Mari.

Another new member, Sherry, was dying, and the doctors gave her no hope. Mari attached herself to Sherry and her family. When it was apparent that death was imminent, Mari went to Sherry's bedside. She was the one person present who knew what to do. She coached the family through the final stages and reassured Sherry constantly. Finally, with the end near, Mari climbed into Sherry's bed and prayed with her then gave her permission to "let go and go home."

Mari wasn't trained as a hospice nurse. She had never read any books on death and dying. Her skilled handling of this difficult circumstance was only explainable as a gift of the Spirit. Through Mari and others like her, we are coming to realize that the Spirit can be trusted to provide every gift we need to accomplish God's will.

THE SPIRIT AND WORSHIP

Jesus told the Samaritan woman that God desires to be worshiped in Spirit and truth (John 4:24). That pronouncement has always been central to our understanding of worship. However, our almost exclusive emphasis on truth in the past will be balanced in the future by a stronger emphasis on the Spirit. The stress we placed on truth led us to examine the worship of the early church to discover a pattern of authorized activities and approved outward forms. In worship, we regarded God as the audience, ourselves as the performers, and the Bible as the script. Our duty was to know and follow the script as closely as possible in order to win the favor of our Divine Auditor.

With our renewed emphasis on the Spirit, we have come to see that there is an additional character that is vital to the performance. The Holy Spirit is the prompter who places within us the desire and heart for worship, helps us understand the beauty of the script, and directs the worship, often in surprising ways. If the Spirit is to have a place in directing our worship, we must be open to his prompting and flexible enough to follow his lead.

In our congregation, those who will be leading in the assembly meet early on Sunday morning to go over the planned order of worship and to pray for God's guidance. As a recent meeting drew to a close, one of the participants said, "You know, the song *There's a Stirring* would fit the theme really well." Immediately, the worship leader responded, "Yes, it would. Let's use it." A quick huddle followed, and our carefully planned order of worship was changed. I redesigned my thoughts to segue into the song partway through the sermon. Then, at the conclusion of the message, we reprised it. The result was both beautiful and powerful. I'm convinced the Spirit was arranging our worship in the way he saw fit.

THE SPIRIT AND LEADERSHIP

A new perspective on leadership emerges when we understand that not only has the Holy Spirit raised up leaders among us, but that he also continues to actively guide the church. Leadership is no longer merely an exercise in goal-setting and personnel management. Rather, it is a quest for the heart of God. Spirit-led leadership recognizes that God can and does direct his church in a variety of ways: through the Word,

through answered prayer, through the voices of members of the body, through the kinds of gifts he gives, and through the opportunities he sets before the flock.

When people seek to be led by the Spirit, they may not always receive clear guidance. Leaders and members alike may at times be confused about the direction of the Spirit's leading. We encountered this recently in the hiring of a new youth minister. We prayerfully appointed a search committee composed of people who we felt were sensitive to the Lord and to the needs of our youth. They did all the things one would expect of such a committee: they advertised for applicants, received resumes, checked references, and interviewed candidates. But they agreed up front that every step of the process would be covered in prayer and that they would not make a recommendation until they felt that the Lord had made his choice clear. After several months, they recommended a candidate. However, just a few days before the search committee's report, a couple of other members contacted us claiming that God had awakened them from their sleep to tell them who our next youth minister was to be: a different candidate from the search committee's choice.

At an earlier time in my life, I would have taken this contradiction as proof positive that God simply doesn't make his specific will known in matters like the hiring of ministers. After all, if he did, how could godly people come up with opposite conclusions regarding his will? Surely both groups were simply mistaking their subjective impressions for the voice of God. Drawing such a conclusion eliminates such confounding and potentially divisive scenarios as the one we faced. It also avoids the possibility of one person using "God told me" as a trump card to overrule the judgment of a group.

It was this conclusion to which Alexander Campbell came in response to the abuses he saw in his day. When the pulpit of a wealthy Presbyterian congregation in Cincinnati became vacant, Campbell noted with ridicule that 17 men wrote the church claiming that the Holy Spirit had called them to their pulpit. Surely the God who is the God of peace, not disorder, would do no such thing. Therefore, Campbell concluded, *any* claim of such guidance from God is inadmissible.

However, the New Testament makes it clear that the early disciples were often confused about the direction of the Spirit's leading. The great prophet John the Baptist at one point went so far as to ask Jesus if he indeed was the promised one (Matt 11:2-3). Upon Judas's death, it was not immediately apparent to the 11 apostles who the Spirit had selected to join their number (Acts 1:23-24). Paul thought it best to preach in Asia and Bithynia, but the Holy Spirit prevented him from doing so before finally calling him to Macedonia (Acts 16:6-10).

The early church also had to weed out bogus claims of the Spirit's guidance from the genuine article. The fact that there were sometimes contradictory messages, both purportedly from the Spirit, did not lead the early church to reject the possibility of the Spirit's guidance. Instead, they put strong emphasis on exercising the gift of discernment (see I John 4:1, 6; 1 Cor. 12:3, 10).

As we seek to be a Spirit-led body, we will need to rediscover the means of discerning the Spirit's true leading. We will need to search for the fruit of Spirit in the lives of those who claim his guidance. We will need to make sure that such persons confess the lordship of Jesus both in word and deed. We will need to identify members in the body who have the gift of distinguishing between the spirits. The fact that this may sometimes leave us temporarily confused should not deter us from continuing to listen for the Spirit's voice.

When we actively seek the Spirit's guidance in leading the church, we will make decisions with a great deal more humility. We will learn to hold our conclusions tentatively while devoting ourselves to prayer as we seek further guidance from above.

MAINTAINING BALANCE

Josiah's generation lost the Bible. The church of my youth forgot the Holy Spirit. The temptation for us is to breathe a sigh of relief and thank God that we're not as blind as they were. The reality is that we too are a generation in danger of losing something precious unless we are vigilant.

Postmodern thought has given us the opportunity to recover an understanding of the Holy Spirit that had been marginalized by modern thought. But postmodernism also presents challenges to genuine Christian faith. As postmodern thought becomes the spirit of the age, succeeding generations will tend to accept its tenets as self-evident realities. With regard to our understanding of the Holy Spirit, there are several tendencies we need to guard against.

Postmodernism tends to deny the existence of objective truth. By contrast, Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth, who would guide his people into all truth (John 16:13). Where the modern mind was threatened by ambiguity, the postmodern mind is far too comfortable with it. Postmodernists may be content to allow contradictory messages to stand side by side without challenge. After all, they reason, "truth is an individual, subjective construct. My truth does not have to be the same as your truth."

Christians need to guard against this. Even in times of confusion and ambiguity, we must hold to the concept that universal truth does exist. The fact that we have not yet fully grasped it should not excuse us from continuing to seek it.

The postmodern mindset also values experience above knowledge. The inherent danger in this should be immediately evident from the New Testament. The church in Corinth valued spiritual experience so highly that they felt their experiences validated their practices and lifestyles *in toto*. Paul's scathing rebukes, calling them unspiritual and immature, should serve as a continuing warning to our generation.

Finally, we must never forget that the Spirit leads his people to glory by way of the cross. In our renewed enthusiasm for the Holy Spirit, we run the risk of adopting an easy triumphalism, assuming that the Spirit-led life will always be joyous and victorious. Paul reminded the Corinthians that though he appeared to be weak and defeated, his presence among them was in reality a demonstration of the Spirit's power (1 Cor 2:3-4). Life in the Spirit includes struggle, sorrow, pain, grief and even despair. What sets it apart is its continuing dependence on a supernatural source for strength, courage, hope, and joy.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 C. Leonard Allen and Danny Gray Swick, *Participating in God's Life: Two Crossroads for Churches of Christ* (Orange, CA: New Leaf Books, 2001), 27-28.
- 2 Ibid., 28.
- 3 William S. Banowsky, *Great Preachers of Today: Sermons of William S. Banowsky*, ed. by J.D. Thomas, (Abilene, TX: Biblical Research Press, 1967), 138.
- 4 Henry T. Blackaby and Claude T. King, *Experiencing God: How to Live the Full Adventure of Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994).

